

## Social Attitudes and Empathy in the Weather Enterprise

My aims here are (1) to bring attention to the ways in which subtle social biases manifest, so that meteorological professionals may be more cognizant of them; and (2) to present strategies (speaking from my own experiences) for combatting biases so that professionals may, in turn, be enabled to reach greater levels of acceptance for those who are different from themselves.

Research has consistently shown that people tend to set aside and treat as less those who are different from themselves, whether these individuals are physically or mentally different or disabled. Why is this? The answer lies in *attitudes* and, moreover, the formation of *stereotypes*. Attitudes are evaluations (of places, people, and things), whereas stereotypes are widely held beliefs (that most members of a group possess some particular characteristic). Attitudes and stereotypes may be *implicit* or *explicit*; the difference between these is that implicit attitudes and stereotypes are those of which we are not consciously aware of or to which we have only limited access, while explicit attitudes and stereotypes are those which are conscious, that we can control and to which we do have access. *Bias*, meanwhile, is a prejudicial, directed manifestation of negative attitude (whether affectively [emotionally], behaviorally, or cognitively) or stereotyped belief. There is some controversy over the purported existence of implicit forms of these variables; and reasonably so – how can we claim the existence of attitudes and beliefs for which we have no, or only little, awareness? Psychologists use such tools as the Implicit Association Test (IAT<sup>1</sup>) to measure this construct.

One demonstration of potential bias lies in findings from a study I conducted<sup>2</sup> on social perceptions of people with autism spectrum conditions. Results suggest that people who

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/education.html> to learn more.

<sup>2</sup> Bolton & Ault, 2018; see <https://doi.org/10.24839/2325-7342.JN23.2.110>

regularly interact and spend time with autistic people are more cognitively accepting of them, while people made aware of the condition (via diagnosis disclosure) tend to behave more positively towards the autistic person with whom they are interacting. The implication of this for people simply made aware, without regular interaction experience, is that they are *only more behaviorally positive*, while still perhaps thinking poorly of the autistic individual. I have seen this finding borne out in the real world, not only in aspects of daily life but at NWA and AMS Annual Meetings, and not only confined to autism. It has affected not only me, as an autistic person, but also my friends and colleagues in the weather enterprise who have their own individual differences and disabilities.

An important first step in combatting bias is to recognize and become aware of it. Perspective-taking (cognitive empathy) is key: It is important to consider that each person is uniquely different, with her or his own life experiences, and to remember that what may be easy for one person might be challenging for another. Humility and a willingness to confront oneself and make oneself uncomfortable are also crucial. We must be willing to humble ourselves and confront potential discomfort, that our views are not superior to others' nor set in stone; that yes, we have indeed felt a certain way towards a certain person or particular group – and in so doing acknowledge that this negative viewpoint can change *if we want it to and work to change it*. Finally, we must consider our response to the other person (affective empathy). Is it appropriate? Is it kind? Is it conducive to that person's wellbeing? What is it that we dislike, or think we dislike, in the other person, and how can we change our perception of him or her? These are but a few strategies I present for consideration. I hope this information proves informative, and helps to affect a destigmatization of individual differences within the meteorological community.